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Assessing Critical Realism Vs Social Constructionism & Social Constructivism for a Social Housing Research Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter builds upon a paper that was published in 2018 which carried out a comparative analysis of the Critical Realist, Social Constructionist and Social Constructivist paradigms and investigated their potential impact on a proposed research study into an aspect of Social Housing in the UK. The research study that was subsequently undertaken formed the basis for a doctoral thesis that was submitted in 2019 and approved in 2020. In part one of this document the content of the original paper will be updated and in part two the application of the chosen approach to the research project will be described. Part one presents an overview of each of the philosophies that were under consideration for the study. It describes the background and core aspects of each philosophy - Critical Realism, Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism. The strengths and weaknesses of each philosophy is assessed to evaluate its potential suitability for the research that is to be undertaken into an aspect of Social Housing. The impact of the different approaches on the proposed research study identified that the Critical Realist philosophy was the most suitable. Part two of the chapter describes how the Critical Realist philosophical approach was applied to the research that was undertaken and provides an update to the contribution of the research to the final doctoral thesis.

Keywords: Critical realism; social constructionism; social constructivism; philosophy; research; methodology.

1. SELECTION of a Philosophical Approach

1.1 Introduction

Part one of this chapter looks at the philosophical approaches of Critical Realism, Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism and begins by presenting an overview of each of the philosophies before carrying out a critical comparative analysis of each of them so that one can be selected as the research approach. The analysis identifies the strengths and weaknesses of each philosophy in relation to the proposed research project into social housing. Having undertaken an analysis of the philosophies it was decided that the philosophy of Critical Realism would be adopted for the research project.

1.2 Critical Realism

Critical Realism is a philosophy that defines an objective reality as one that exists independently of individual perception but also recognizes the role that individual subjective interpretation plays in defining reality [1]. On the Positivist Subjectivist Continuum [2] it occupies the middle ground between the two opposites of Positivism and Subjectivism. Positivism is a philosophical position which emphasizes the empirical analysis of objective phenomena [3] and subjectivism emphasizes the individual perception of reality [2]. A Positivist approach looks at the relationship between variables [1]

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to understand phenomena and the Subjectivist approach looks at the different perceptions of reality that individuals have. It presents a framework within which researchers can choose and apply methodological approaches as opposed to set or prescribed methods for undertaking research [4]. Some academics have posited that under this approach some research findings are more accurate than others [1,5]. Knowledge can be obtained and interpreted in different ways [6] and the changing nature of social reality makes the process of isolating variables difficult [3].

Critical Realism is a philosophical system originating from the work of the Indo-British philosopher Roy Bhaskar in collaboration with other social theorists including Margaret Archer, Mervyn Hartwig, Tony Lawson, Alan Norrie and Andrew Sayer. It has a 'journal, a book series, an association, an annual meeting and all the trappings of an intellectual movement' [7]. Bhaskar sought to develop a realist philosophy of science and social science. It argues for the development of an ontology between empirical realism (Positivism) and transcendental idealism (Constructivism/Subjectivism). It accepts objectivism and presents a stratified view of reality that looks at emergent entities and the underlying structures that cause events to happen [1]. The existence of phenomena with multiple interpretations of them results in a hierarchy of meanings emerges to justify 'from an objective standpoint and how it is understood, perceived and theorized by subjective observers. Sayer [8] posited that traditional approaches by researchers to provide an explanation of the phenomena that they were researching were unsatisfactory in seeking to explore and identify the underlying causes for phenomena. Through the Critical Realist approach phenomena are looked at through an explorative process to identify the structures and mechanisms that lie beneath the surface and cause the events that constitute the phenomena. The primary function of Critical Realism thus lies in determining what is objectively real and what is subjectively accepted as truth' [5].

Critical Realism views reality as 'a stratified, open system of emergent entities' [1] which means that things can happen that make a difference in the world, but they are related to the environment that they are in or the conditions that surround them. To view how things can happen, Critical Realism uses a stratified ontology which divides reality into three differentiated layers [1,8]. These three layers were called domains by Bhaskar [9], and labelled as the empirical, the actual, and the real. O'Mahoney and Vincent [1], clarify how the Critical Realist approach to ontology differs from the positivist position, which 'equates reality with recordable events' and the social constructionist position which 'collapses ontology to discourse'. Sayer [8], differentiates the stratified ontology of Critical Realism compared to other ontologies, 'which have flat ontologies populated by either the actual or the empirical, or a conflation of the two'. In contrast to these other ontologies where only the observable exists, Critical Realism has at the level of the real, the structures and objects that are hidden and whose powers can be released to generate events. The three layers within Critical Realism show things happening and how they happen. Specific terms are employed to describe these aspects and to relate them to each domain. Table 1 identifies each domain, the aspect associated with it, the specific term assigned and a definition.

Table 1. Ontological levels and defined terms in Critical Realism [10]

Domain	Aspect	Term	Term Definition
Empirical	What has happened and was experienced or perceived	Event	Things that happen [9], things that occur, things that are visible and things that are experienced/perceived
Actual	How or what caused the happening to happen	Mechanism	A process in a concrete system that makes it what it is [11] Ways of acting of things [9] Triggers that cause things to happen Central to the philosophy of Critical Realism [12]
Real	Conditions or environment that enable the happening to be triggered	Structure	Sets of internally related objects or practices [8]

At the level of the real exist social structures (a group of objects) or objects which have causal powers. These powers are released through the activation of mechanisms at the level of the actual that cause events to happen, and the experience of these events is at the level of the empirical [8]. Social structures at the level of the real are hidden, some mechanisms at the level of the actual are hidden, and some are observable, whereas most experiences and the level of the empirical are observable. Although structures are hidden, at the level of the real, their effects can be seen or interpreted at the level of the empirical.

The language employed by Bhaskar and other CR writers, use different labels can be used to describe the domains and what is within them. An example of this is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. A comparison of labels used by CR researchers [10]

Domain	Bhaskar	Sayer	Mingers and Wilcocks	Smith and Johnston
Empirical	Experiences	Events	Events	Events (Experienced)
Actual	Events	Mechanisms	Events / Non-Events / Mechanisms	Events / Non-Events
Real	Mechanisms	Structures	Mechanisms / Structures	Mechanisms / Structures

In this chapter, the language and interpretation of the three domains by Sayer [8] are adopted. This is so that only one set of terms are usable in relation to a specific domain and for which an understanding has been developed, it provides the research with clarity. This would not be the case if terms were used interchangeably. It was felt, that the terms used by Sayer [8], provide an understandable explanation of the linking between the three layers within Critical Realism. There are differences between the three layers about what is visible and what is hidden. At the level of the empirical, events that happen and their effects can be seen. Below the level of direct observation, O'Mahoney and Vincent [1], identify that 'deeper levels awaiting discovery' for the CR researcher. Where there is no direct observation at the levels of the actual and the real, the author is looking to move away from the concrete to the abstract in order to theorise about mechanisms at the level of the actual and structures at the level of the real. Fig. 1 identifies the three layers, the aspects relating to each level, and the associated terms. The diagram uses a tree to illustrate how each level operates, what can be observed, and what is hidden.

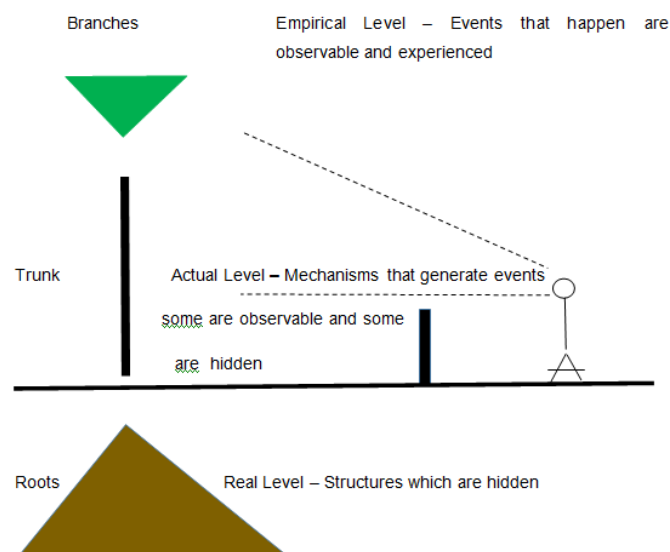


Fig. 1. Three ontological levels in critical realism [10]

Fig. 1 has been adapted from the original to show that at the level of the actual, an additional line of vision has been put in to show that some causal mechanisms are hidden, and some are observable. In the original, the wall is higher, and the line of sight from the individual is above the wall, which identifies causal mechanisms as hidden. It identifies that at the level of the empirical, the branches of the tree, which are events that happen, can be directly observed. At the level of the actual, the middle of the tree trunk can be directly observed, but the lower part of the tree trunk is hidden and cannot be directly observed. Following this, some of the mechanisms that operate at this level and which generate events can be seen whereas others are hidden. At the level of the real, the roots of the tree, which are the structures in which mechanisms operate, are hidden and cannot be directly observed [10].

1.3 Social Constructionism

Social Constructionism focuses on the things that are created through the process of social interaction. At the Subjectivist end of the Positivist Subjectivist Continuum it views all knowledge as constructed including representations of physical and biological reality. There are two types of Social Constructionism, strong and weak. The former believes that all knowledge is socially constructed whereas the latter considers knowledge to be socially constructed but acknowledges that some things are not. Social constructionism has a long research tradition within the social sciences and encompasses different perspectives, including discourse analysis, sociological, and symbolic interactive approaches. Jacobs et al. [13], state that the range of perspectives employed by housing researchers increased and this has 'extended' the understanding beyond 'the confines of the 'state versus market narrative to cover areas generally perceived to be within the domain of cultural geography, ethnography, and social anthropology'. Fopp [14] has suggested that housing researchers employ different approaches in their work because they want to gain a greater understanding of the problems being investigated. This greater understanding involves an exploration of the causes behind these problems and the experiences of people who face them. Jacobs and Manzi [15], state that the social constructionist epistemology views the experience that an individual has as 'an active process of interpretation rather than a passive material apprehension of an external physical world'. King [16], points out that social constructionism has been criticised for upholding a relativist view of knowledge. Woolgar and Pawluch [17], labelled social constructionism as 'ontological gerrymandering' where the researcher manipulates the boundaries between perception and what is real. Jacobs et al. [13], state that social constructionism 'denies the existence of an objective material world'. However, Collin [18], asserts that social constructionists argue that 'their perception of the material world is affected by the way we think and talk about it, by our consensus about its nature, by the way, we explain it to each other, and by the concepts we use to grasp it'. Cruikshank [19] views social constructionism as 'a broad tradition' and claims that social constructionists take 'a negative approach based on scepticism' where knowledge claims are 'constructions of reality that are imbued with power'.

The view that everything is a social construct has been challenged because of its 'subjective nature' which restricts engagement in research 'with the possibility of gathering evidence about the real world' [20]. Jacobs and Manzi [21], have adopted a social constructionist position which views reality as a social construct but also recognises to a limited extent, the idea of an objective material reality. King [16], labelled this position as 'weak' social constructionism compared to a 'strong' more radical version. Taylor [20], identified that the strong form of social constructionism 'can be critiqued' for ignoring aspects of the objective world that cannot be explained as social constructs such as 'a volcano exploding'. Fopp [14], stated that the weak position was more meaningful to housing research because 'some objects can be socially constructed and others not'. Somerville [22], alleges that to challenge the increasing dominance of the strong version of social constructionism that was permeating housing studies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, realist approaches were promoted by housing academics.

1.4 Social Constructivism

Social Constructivism is a theory about the development of knowledge through the interactions that individuals have with each other. It holds that truth is constructed by social processes and that it is historically and culturally specific. They are contingent based on human perception and social

experience. Social Constructivism looks at the learning that an individual person gains from the interaction process. According to Social Constructivism the process of learning builds on knowledge that already exists, an individual can interpret existing knowledge in new ways. It is a philosophical explanation about the nature of learning. Knowledge is identified as a product of human interaction and is not something to be discovered. It is the outcome of interactions between people within the environment [23-26].

1.5 Critical Comparison

These overviews of Critical Realism, Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism show that these philosophies offer views upon knowledge and reality. Critical Realism is in the middle of the Positivist Subjectivist Continuum whereas Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism are at the Subjectivist end of the continuum. These last two philosophical positions are at the opposite end of the Continuum from the Positivist approach.

Critical Realism combines Positivist and Subjectivist approaches in one philosophy acknowledging the existence of an external world as well as a socially constructed world. Social Constructionism is focused on the social world with the weak form being closer to the Critical Realist philosophical position than the strong form. The strong form of Social Constructionism believes that all knowledge is socially constructed which can be critiqued for ignoring natural phenomena occurring such as a volcano exploding (which cannot be explained as a social construction). Social Constructivism does not reject the existence of an objective world but as a learning theory focuses on the perceptions, experiences and process of learning that an individual has developed about the world that they live in [10].

A limitation of Critical Realism is that it has been described by some commentators as providing researchers with an approach whereby they 'sit on the fence' when interpreting research data to maintain the illusion of objective reality [27]. In any research study the knowledge that is being researched exists independently outside of the study, but the research process cannot independently assess all the external knowledge of the phenomena [5]. The Critical Realist approach allows the researcher to identify, explore and seek to understand the structures and mechanisms that cause events to happen. During the investigation process the researcher can contextualize aspects of the objective world as well as constructs from the social world that influence or determine the link of causation.

A limitation of the approach of Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism is that they encourage cultism and dogmatism by only seeing truth as 'social convention, playing by the rules of a particular group' [28] where there is no truth beyond the social construct of the group [29]. The danger of a dogmatic approach is that it rejects changes to a way of believing that can be evidenced and by becoming inflexible to accept such changes you are entering the territory of cultism [29]. These criticisms of Social constructionism have been rejected by Zielke [30]. Errors are not recognised by Social constructionism and no one view is considered above another [27]. A Critical Realist approach will eliminate the potential effects of cultism, dogmatism, and error. A Realist philosophical approach acknowledges that a real world exists and that knowledge about it can be evidenced [28]. The subjective nature of Social Constructionist and Social Constructivist approaches does not allow the researcher to engage with the possibility of gathering evidence about the real world. Social Constructionism is seen as nihilistic [30] and unhelpful to the researcher who is seeking to explain the reality of phenomena [28]. Social Constructionism is subjective and allows for the world to be known any way that people perceive it to be whereas Critical Realism 'maintains that people are bounded by a real physical and social world. They need to acknowledge this reality and necessity to achieve their goals. They cannot wishfully dismiss physical and social reality' [28].

2. RESEARCH PROJECT UNDERTAKEN

2.1 Impact on Research Project (Updated)

The research project undertaken used a mixed approach employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The study looked at small community based Social Housing Providers (SHPs)

operating on both sides of the Anglo-Scottish border between England and Scotland. The aim of the research was to understand how these organizations were surviving within a competitive environment and what strategies they employed. The research required that a suitable tool of analysis was used to enable the researcher to delve beneath the data collected and to identify, explore and understand the underlying structures and mechanisms that are enacted by these SHPs. Prior to starting the research it had been felt by the researcher that either a weak Social Constructionist or a Critical Realist approach could be taken. However, following further reflection it was felt that a weak Social Constructionist approach does not offer the complete commitment to the exploration of the real world as the Critical Realist approach does in offering the researcher an approach that allows them to engage fully in exploring the real world and the social world.

Taylor identified that 'to truly reflect the social world that is being researched then the research design needs to be methodologically *messy*' [31]. This is referring to the ability of the researcher to use a variety of methodological tools to carry out the programme of research as opposed to a rigid one. This has been characteristic of the Positivist approach which has sought to measure facts and knowledge about the real world through a scientific lens that placed emphasis on the collection of empirical evidence. Once the overall philosophical approach was decided the specific methods were selected to undertake the research. The design of the research approach would follow a philosophical approach that places ontology above epistemology, in contrast to the approach of Positivists and Social Constructionists [1]. Critical Realism does not have a prescribed approach for researchers to follow when applying the philosophy to a research project. The Critical Realist researcher is 'interested in many kinds of data' [32] and must employ creative ways to obtain this research data. In this research the researcher was looking for causal mechanisms and the structures that lie beneath the surface that trigger events to happen. In the early stages of research these mechanisms and structures were not easily identified, and the researcher had to employ 'ingenious research practice which explores possible uses of new data and information that could indicate their character and existence' [32]. A flexible approach was employed by the researcher to this research employing several different research techniques to apply a Critical Realist philosophy to research at a 'relatively concrete level' [33].

2.1 Contribution to Doctoral Thesis

The philosophy of Critical Realism provided the analytical tool that was used for the doctoral thesis. Through empirical data, the respondents interviewed during the research phase highlighted general issues about social housing as well as specific strategic responses that individual SHPs have adopted. The respondents interviewed were from five small SHPs, local authorities, and the third sector. Critical Realism was used to tease out elements that contribute to or influence the strategic responses that these SHPs have made in response to the pressures of operating in a competitive environment. They were also assessed to identify why they have occurred and if there were any relevant contributory factors. The strategic responses for each SHP were described in the thesis. The Critical Realist analytical tool can be illustrated as shown in Fig. 2. The approach presents a stratified ontology that operates on three levels (empirical, actual, and real) and through which the processes of looking at the mechanisms that cause specific actions to be taken by SHPs can be analysed. Fig. 2 identifies the three layers and highlights the varied nature of the interactions that can occur between them.

In Fig. 2, the section of the diagram labelled interaction indicates how movement occurs between the ontological levels. It reveals that different actions can be generated from the same source, such as two mechanisms (M1 and M2) coming from the same structure (S1), or two events being generated by the same mechanism (E1 and E3 from M1, E2, and E3 from M2, E4, and E5 from M3). The variations in courses of action that can derive from the same source (structure or mechanism) reflect the different contexts or circumstances that might be present in that situation, organisation, or individual.

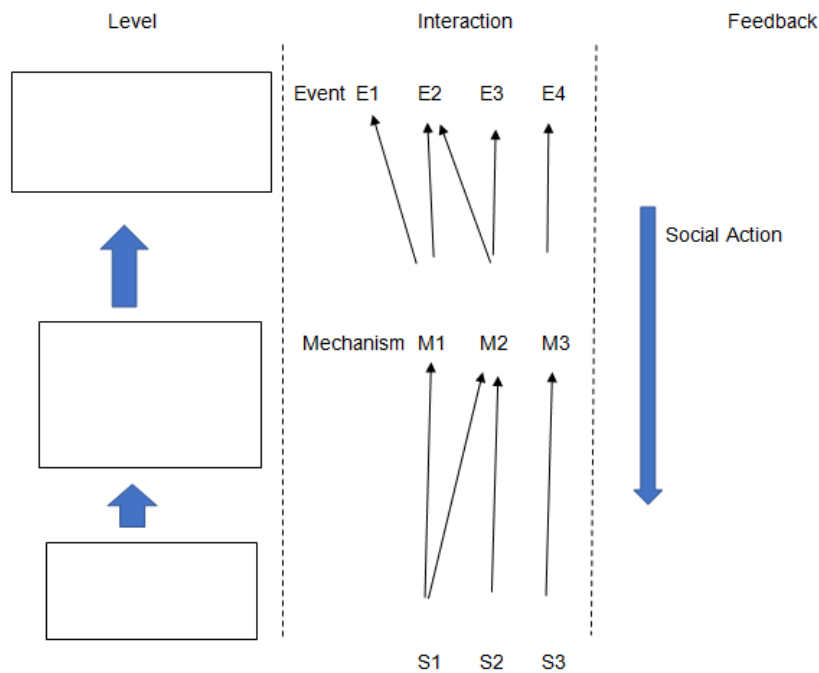


Fig. 2. Three ontological layers and interaction between them

The model has been adapted from the one put forward by Sayer [8] to show that the direction is not only upwards from the level of the real to the level of the empirical. The section of the diagram labelled feedback represents actions that go downwards from the level of the empirical to the level of the real. These can be actions that change the way mechanisms work at the level of the actual, or that leads to a shift in the structures that operate at the level of the real. Such a change is subject to a time dimension.

The study noted that since the 1980s, the role of Primary Housing Provider (PHP) had transferred from the state through local authority landlords to independent SHPs. These organisations are required to operate as businesses within a competitive environment, but they are also relied on to fulfil a social responsibility to provide homes for people in society who have a housing need. To balance both of these demands, SHPs need to adopt strategies that enable them to continue to provide services as well as identifying and mitigating against any risk that operational challenges may pose to the organisation. Critical Realism used a stratified ontology to look into the empirical data generated from the research interviews. Within this context at the level of the real, the structures that lie beneath the surface exercise a powerful influence on the general characteristics of events that happen and the range of possible outcomes that can come from those events. They provide a backdrop against which the mechanisms at the level of the actual operate. These mechanisms generate events that happen and can influence outcomes in specific cases, times, and places.

A common finding in the study was the effect that the contextual factors or conditions relating to each organisation have on them as well as the strategic responses that these SHPs adopt. Each organisation had contextual conditions or circumstances that were unique to them and only impacted upon them. Some of the contextual conditions can be outside of the control of the individual organisation. One example is the geography of the area or locality where the SHP is operating such as rural areas with dispersed settlements. A further example is the demographics of the customers that the SHP serves, such as an elderly or ageing population. Other examples include the number of competitors present in their area of operation, and the legacy of past decisions or actions. A contextual condition may be the actions of a state body itself, such as awarding work. These factors can add to the competitive pressures that the individual SHP faces.

Different events may happen as part of the process of finding a solution, and these may have a negative outcome. Examples could include loans not being increased to invest in the housing offer, or the organisation not having the capacity to withstand any short-term impact while a longer-term solution is found. Commercial businesses can be caught in this situation where they are a profitable organisation but do not have the cash flow in the short term to sustain their commitments. In this scenario, the mechanism continues to be triggered, but the nature of the search changes to seeing a solution for the organisations future. The type of event that this may generate is a discussion with other SHPs regarding a merger or some form of service amalgamation.

The conditions identified relating to each SHP were contingent. The places and localities where each SHP operate have different characteristics which impacted on these organisations. These characteristics can change over time, and it can be argued, that the locality is itself contingent. As shown already, there are external ones that the individual organisation does not have any control over. Some conditions are internal such as the size of the housing stock. A change in one of these conditions can result in a challenge and potential risk for the organisation. The two types of contingent relations are not necessarily independent of each other. It can be demonstrated that one can produce the other, such as past actions or responses. An example being alterations to housing stock within an area which may over time have the impact of rendering the properties as hard to let. As part of its strategic planning process, each organisation should know the conditions that relate to each part of their business and be able to assess the potential risk of any change that may occur.

Through the policy of austerity, the operating context for local authorities has changed. The resources that central government distribute to them for the provision of services at a local level have been reduced with a negative impact on the provision of services. A result of the reduction in available funds is that local authorities focus more on the statutory provision of services. There is a difference in the housing systems in England and Scotland regarding the support that a strategic housing authority can provide for the housing sector in their area. In Scotland, councils have a statutory responsibility to have a housing strategy in place for their area and to allocate grant funding to SHPs. In England, there is no statutory duty for local authorities to have a housing strategy in place.

One of the significant challenges for SHPs identified in the interviews with local authority officers was their ability to meet the need for affordable housing within the area of the LDNP in Cumbria. Local authorities had worked to support the development of the community housing sector, and a government grant had funded this work. The responsibility to continue this work had resulted in six local authorities forming a partnership called the HUB, and the work has been outsourced to a third sector organisation. It was felt by Respondent P, that the CCH HUB was an innovative approach between local authorities to support the community housing sector. The third sector is contracted to provide some services on behalf of the statutory sector. It was claimed, by the third sector respondents in their interviews, some local authorities had used the contracting process to pass on additional costs and delivery responsibilities. Organisations in the third sector work with competitive pressures but like SHPs. For innovation, it was suggested that the pace of change within the operating environment had increased so much that innovative changes were not given sufficient time to bed in, and the benefits from the changes were not realised before the innovation was redundant.

3. CONCLUSION

Critical Realism is a useful philosophical framework for researchers to use for carrying out social science research. There is not much guidance in how to apply the approach to operational research or what methods to use, one book [1] offers examples from business and management of 'concrete' research carried out using an applied Critical Realist approach. The research and application to a doctoral thesis described in this chapter has been carried out within the sphere of social housing. Although there have been examples of a Critical Realist approach within Housing Studies these have been focused on Homelessness [34] and housing systems [35]. This research project looked at social housing providers and to achieve the desired outcomes the researcher used an adaptive approach, utilizing a variety of methods to obtain the required data. Critical Realist researchers have been criticized for not being rigid in their research approach and appearing as not being thorough. However, as the research process involves identifying underlying causal mechanisms and structures

these are not always obvious in the early stages of the research process. As such, the researcher adapted their approach to sift through the data and seek to identify the causal mechanisms and structures.

The philosophy of Critical Realism was employed as a tool to analyse the data from the interviews. The Critical Realist approach has been applied in many ways across different academic disciplines to explore structures and mechanisms that lie beneath the surface of the area under investigation. There is only a limited number of examples of the application of Critical Realism within the discipline of housing studies. This study has advanced the understanding of applying Critical Realism to housing research and this learning can potentially be replicated in other research areas. It is recommended that prior to undertaking any research project that the researcher has undergone a process whereby they have assessed the philosophical lens that they are conducting the research through. Their research design and methodology should be congruent with the philosophical approach taken.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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